



Community Inquiry:
An examination of underage drinking in
Riverbank, California

Project facilitated by the
Center for Public Policy Studies
at
California State University, Stanislaus

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Structure of the Report

The research process generated a wealth of information. Reporting the details of such a great deal of information can get in the way of the important results, conclusions, and strategies generated from the information. We have tried to achieve a balance between the tensions of readability and full exposure of the data by organizing material into major sections.

The first section of the report contains an introduction to the community inquiry process and the purpose of the study. This information is important to understanding how we arrived at our conclusions.

The second section of the report describes the methodology that was used for conducting the research. This section includes the research design, sampling plan, data collection, protection of human subjects, and plan for data analysis.

The third major section, Results, reports the distilled findings generated from our survey of youth in Riverbank. The section includes an overview of the sample and data connected to the major research questions.

The final section, Major Findings & Implications, focuses on the core lessons learned and implications for future steps. Collectively, these components embody the fundamental elements that comprised this research study on underage drinking.

In addition to the narrative report, we have included an appendix (attachments) that contains all of the data connected to each of the survey questions. This appendix not only includes the raw data for each question, but also includes a breakdown of each question based on gender and grade level. This information is designed to offer the reader a complete view of the data.

INTRODUCTION

The Center for Public Policy Studies at California State University, Stanislaus, was approached by representatives of the Riverbank Community Collaborative and Step by Step Community Youth Activists from Riverbank High School in Riverbank, CA, to help conduct research on underage drinking. This research is directly in line with the mission and vision of the Step by Step Program, in that it engages young people to become actively involved in examining and taking actions to address complex community concerns. In conducting research, The Center for Public Policy Studies utilizes a process that embraces and promotes community connections and ownership. The process involves engaging community members as the experts and owners of their experiences. This model of research engages community members (as co-researchers) in all aspects of the research process—conceptualizing the problem, developing data collection strategies, interpreting findings, and offering recommendations.

During the discussions with student representatives from Step by Step, underage drinking was decided to be the main emphasis of the project. Representatives of Behavior Health and Recovery Services (the funding source for the project) suggested that the project was quite open and that the co-researchers could design the study to fit their (and their community's) needs.

The Center for Public Policy Studies (CPPS) relied on the Step by Step Community Youth Activists (SSCYA) as the central resource for this project. Members of the SSCYA were invited to participate in a co-researcher group. The co-researcher group was open and consistently included between 10 and 15 youth per meeting. The group was given the responsibility of exploring the issues of alcohol use by young people in Riverbank and ultimately crafting research to test their assumptions and to develop quality data that could be used by members of the Riverbank community for informed decision making surrounding the complex issues connected to underage drinking.

Engagement and Exploration

The process started by having the co-researcher group engage in dialogue and critical reflection focused on alcohol use in the community. Over the course of four months (biweekly meetings, each lasting two hours), the group explored issues surrounding the following: the scope/magnitude of the problem of underage drinking, the consequences of underage drinking, the causes of underage drinking, the co-researchers' personal experiences with underage

drinking, and the possible strategies for addressing the problem. This critical reflection phase served multiple purposes: 1) it allowed the members of the research team to form a bond; 2) it required the research team to explore their views (beliefs and biases) about the problem and all of the factors connected to underage drinking; 3) it served as the basis for developing guiding research questions that would: a) provide information in areas for which questions remained or that were necessary for fully understanding the issues and b) allow the group to test its assumptions regarding the problem; and 4) when coupled with the data generated from the actual research study, it put the group in a more informed position to offer strategies and recommendations for how to begin taking actions to address the issue in Riverbank.

At the end of the engagement and exploration phase, the co-researcher group developed a complete methodology for gathering information that was used to understand the issues in Riverbank. Ultimately, the research was designed to examine three overarching research questions:

- 1) What is the scope of the problem of underage drinking among Riverbank students?
- 2) What factors appear to be connected to underage drinking in Riverbank?
- 3) What strategies can be employed to address the issues surrounding underage drinking in Riverbank?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Background

Following the exploration and engagement phase of this Participatory Action Research Study, the co-researcher group turned its attention to the development of a research methodology capable of producing credible evidence that could guide decision making and actions. Initially, the group engaged in a process of “question formulation.” This phase of the process is what we have termed the “jeopardy phase.” For the next four to five meetings, the group focused on the types of questions that the co-researchers had surrounding underage drinking, whose answers would help them better understand the concern and would allow them to make informed recommendations regarding strategies for prevention and intervention. In the question formulation process, the co-researchers were encouraged to reflect on their individual experiences (shared during the engagement phase) as a basis for developing questions. In other words, based on their experiences, they held the potential “answers.” What was needed were the “questions.” Ultimately, the process led to the development of a series of questions that lent themselves nicely to a “survey/questionnaire” that was geared toward other young people. While the co-researchers indicated that it would be extremely important to gather information from adults and parents in the community, their major emphasis at this stage of the process was on youth.

With the questions (survey) clearly articulated, the group then moved to the development of the design of the study. For at least three meetings, the group directed its attention to strategies for collecting data. While a host of ideas were considered, it was ultimately determined that an electronic survey would be the best way to collect the needed data. At this juncture, the co-researchers engaged district administration to help formulate and finalize the research process. What follows is a description of the process that was developed.

Design & Data Collection

The co-researchers developed an electronic survey that was utilized to gather data from students at three schools in the Riverbank community: Riverbank High School, Adelante High School, and Cardozo Middle School. The electronic survey included 37 items that explored various issues of underage drinking (<https://www.surveymonkey.com/s/Riverbank>). The co-researcher group worked closely with the three principals and superintendent in order to create a data collection strategy that would work for each school.

The data were collected during school hours, as each school has a portable computer lab. The principals from each school agreed to have students complete the electronic survey during a specific class period. That is, the computers were transported to the classrooms until all students had the opportunity to complete the survey. The data collection was facilitated and monitored by the school administration. The students were instructed to type in the URL, which took them directly to the survey. After pretesting, it has been determined that the survey took between 10-15 minutes to complete.

Instrumentation

The electronic survey included 37 questions that tap six domains related to underage drinking: a) consumption, b) parents, c) family, d) friends, e) school, and f) prevention/intervention. All questions were developed by the co-researcher team. The tool included predominately closed-ended questions; however, there were a handful of items that asked for the participant to explain or expand on a specific issue. The tool also contained three demographic questions that allowed the researchers to examine the impact of demographic characteristics on underage drinking: a) school attended, b) gender, and c) grade level.

Protection of Human Subjects

As this was an anonymous survey, the researchers had no way of connecting responses to individual students. Consent forms were sent home to all students from the three participating schools. The high school consent forms were a “passive” consent. That is, if parents/guardians did not want their child to participate, they were asked to return a signed form. The middle school consent form was an “active” consent, which required each parents to authorize their child’s participation in the study. These consent forms follow the protocol used by each school. In accordance with these protocols, the consent forms came directly from the school principal. The consent forms were prepared in both English and Spanish.

The individual students were given the opportunity to opt out of the study. The introduction to the survey included an informed consent statement, and students who did not want to participate were told that they may stop at any point without penalty.

The full research process was reviewed and approved by each school administrator (principal) and the superintendent of the school district, as well as the University Institutional Review Board.

Data Analysis

Upon completing the online survey, the data were submitted directly to the University depository created via Survey Monkey. Initially, the researchers from the Center for Public Policy Studies tabulated basic frequency distributions for each item on the survey. This information was then presented to the co-research team in a series of meetings. The group examined the data associated with each question and began drawing meaning from the data. As the meetings continued, the co-researcher group moved beyond looking at basic frequency distributions and began formulating more complex questions for data analysis. Based on these discussions, the CPPS researchers returned to the data and performed statistical testing that would address the questions that emerged from the meetings. The data (results) from these tests were then shared with the full co-researcher team, who used the information to further draw meaning from the data.

RESULTS

Key Demographic Characteristics of the Sample

A total of 688 surveys were completed by students from the two high schools and one middle school. Middle school students made up 14% of the participants, while high school students made up the remaining 86% of the sample. Table 1 provides a breakdown of the participants by grade level and highlights the fact that while the participants encompassed all grade levels (6th thru 12th), ninth graders had the highest participation rate, while eighth graders had the lowest.

Table 1.

Grade level of participants

What grade are you currently in?	Response Percent	Response Count
6th grade	10.5%	69
7th grade	2.4%	16
8th grade	1.2%	8
9th grade	24.2%	159
10th grade	21.3%	140
11th grade	18.7%	123
12th grade	21.6%	142

The participants were almost equally divided based on gender, with girls (52.4%) slightly outnumbering boys (47.6%). Figure 2 illustrates the fact that the gender composition was stable across the various grade levels.

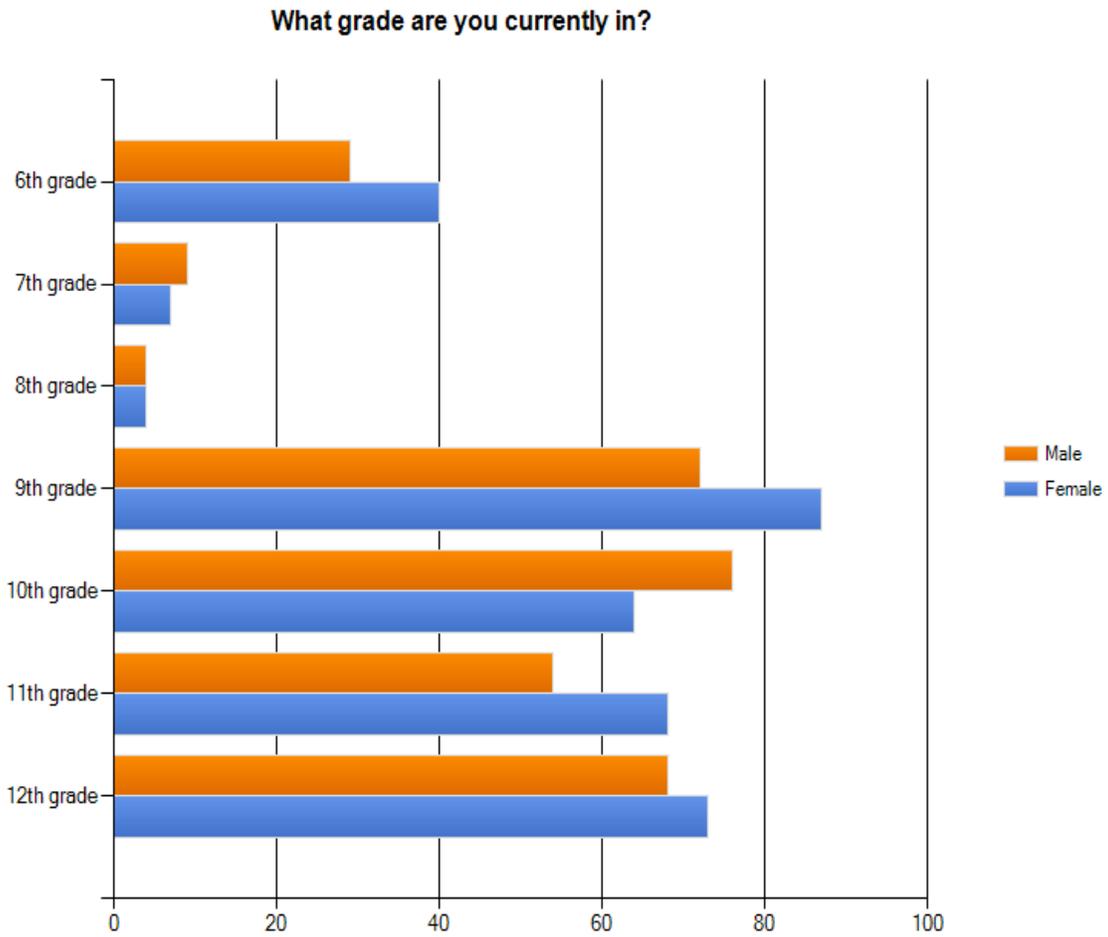


Figure 1. Gender Composition by Grade (number of participants)

Research Question #1

As the research study was designed to address three overarching research questions, this section of the write-up centers on providing the data connected to each research question.

1) What is the scope of the problem of underage drinking among Riverbank students?

Eleven questions were posed to the participants, under the category alcohol consumption, that are directly connected to the first research question. In response to the question, “Do you ever drink alcohol,” 55.2% of the students admitted to drinking. This percentage was nearly identical based on gender, with 57% of the boys indicating that they drink alcohol, while 54% of the girls admitted to drinking alcohol. However, as illustrated in Figure 2, there were considerable differences for high school students based on grade level, with tenth graders having the highest percentage of students who have drunk alcohol (76%). Ninth grade participants, having the lowest percentage of students who admitted to drinking alcohol, were evenly split in their answers to the question. In terms of middle school students, five of the 69 sixth graders (7.2%) indicated that they have drunk alcohol, while none of the 16 seventh graders and only 1 of the 8 eighth graders reported that they have drunk alcohol.

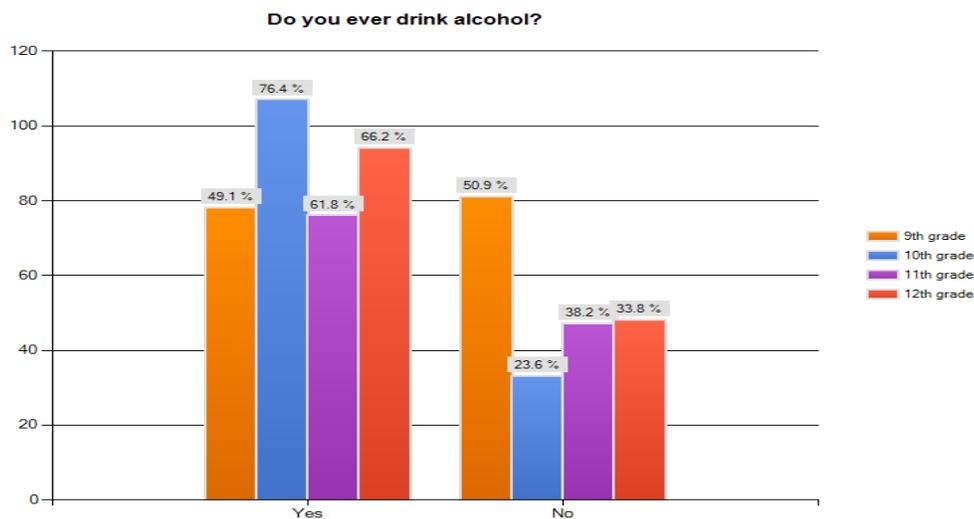


Figure 2. Alcohol Consumption based on High School Grade Level

The next question sought to determine how often the youth in the sample drink alcohol. Of the 382 participants who responded that they drink alcohol, the largest majority (64%, n=243) indicated that they drink “only on special occasions.” At the same time, 17% (n=64) reported drinking weekly, 10% (n=39) reported drinking monthly, and 9% (n=36) reported drinking daily.

The frequency pattern of alcohol consumption was somewhat consistent based on gender. As revealed in Table 2, the highest percentage of girls (70%) and boys (61%) indicated that they drink only on special occasions. Nevertheless, the data reveal a pattern that suggests that boys in the sample tend to drink more frequently than girls: 11% of the boys responded that they drink on a daily basis compared to 4% of the girls, and 19% of the boys indicated that they drink on a weekly basis compared to 14% of the girls.

Table 2.
Frequency of Alcohol Consumption based on Gender

Frequency of Consumption	Boys	Girls
Daily	11% (n=21)	4% (n=8)
Weekly	19% (n=25)	14% (n=26)
Monthly	9% (n=16)	12% (n=22)
Only on Special Occasions	61% (n=111)	70% (n=128)

n=376

The consumption pattern (for the portion of the sample that indicated that they drink) was very consistent based on grade level. Again, the highest percentage of students in each grade level reported that they drink only on special occasions. The tenth grade group, which had the

highest percentage of students (71%) who indicated that they drink alcohol, also had the highest percentage of students who indicated that they drink only on special occasions.

In the sample, the average age at which the participants reported that they started drinking alcohol was 13.6 years. Two thirds of the sample (67%) reported that they were 14 or under when they began drinking alcohol. There was no difference in the average age at which boys (13.5) and girls (13.7) began drinking alcohol. In terms of the effects of their drinking, the largest percentage of students (46%) indicated that when they do drink, they usually get tipsy/buzzed, while 35% indicated that they do not drink enough to feel it or that it has no effect on them. At the same time, 18% of the students indicated that when they drink, they usually get drunk. This pattern (related to the effects of drinking) was consistent across grade levels and gender.

When asked if they go out of Riverbank to drink alcohol, just under half of the participants (47% of those who drink) answered “sometimes.” Over one third of the participants (39%) indicated that they do not leave Riverbank, while 13% indicated that they leave the community to consume alcohol.

In terms of understanding the scope of the problem of underage drinking, the participants were also asked about drinking and driving. Of those students who indicated that they have a driver’s license and that they drink alcohol, 21% indicated that they have driven while they had been drinking. Under the same circumstances (having a license and reporting that one drinks alcohol), boys in the sample were more likely to have driven while drinking (22%) than girls (15%). In the total sample of youth, 58% (n=394) reported that they have been in a car while the person driving had been drinking. This percentage was relatively consistent across gender and grade levels.

In the sample, 93% of the youth indicated that when they drink, they do so with others. This pattern was consistent for both males and females and across grade levels. Clearly, underage drinking in Riverbank is a social phenomenon.

Research Question #2

2) What factors appear to be connected to underage drinking in Riverbank?

Both qualitative and quantitative data were generated to examine factors that appear to be connected to underage drinking. The factors that emerged from the data connected to underage drinking are complex. That is, a host of variables appear to be producing an atmosphere where underage drinking is expected and, at times, supported.

Mixed messages from adults appear to be a major contributor to underage drinking. According to the participants, while youth are told about the negative consequences of drinking, they witness behaviors that suggest that drinking is not a problem. Imbedded in this major finding, “family/parents” appear to be a major contributor to the mixed messages that youth receive regarding underage drinking. According to the qualitative data produced by the youth in the sample: a) parents are “asleep” when it comes to the realities of drinking; b) parents/adults do not really understand what occurs related to underage drinking; c) parents/adults allow drinking on certain occasions; and d) youth who drink are also youth who are viewed by adults as “stars.”

The notion of mixed messages is also clearly evident in the quantitative data. According to the youth, 75.9% reported that their parents have talked to them about drinking. Nevertheless, the youth report that these “conversations” are very simplistic and short and tend to focus on a simple message: “Don’t do it.” According to the co-researchers, conversations between young people and adults rarely include a deeper discussion regarding the role of alcohol in young people’s lives.

The co-researchers also point out the fact that the verbal messages youth receive from adults (namely parents or guardians) do not appear to match the behaviors or actions of adults. Of the youth in the sample who reported to drinking alcohol, 33% indicated that their parents were aware of the fact that they drink. Another 23% indicated that their parents might know that they drink alcohol. At the same time, 50% of the youth indicated that their parents allow them to drink on special occasions. Additionally, while 67.9% of the youth indicated that their parents have rules regarding drinking, the consequences to drinking do not serve as a deterrent and are not fully enforced. Finally, 26.5% (n=180) of the youth in the sample reported that their parent or guardian has a drinking problem.

In addition to mixed messages, another factor that contributes to underage drinking surrounds the issues of **“freedom” and “experimentation.”** According to the data, the creation and enforcement of rules/restrictions result in youth wanting to “experiment” (wanting to rebel). Alcohol becomes a tool used by youth to rebel. Youth who feel connections to adults are less likely to engage in underage drinking because they do not want to “let adults down.” When adults engage in activities that devalue youth (“when they treat some youth as worthless”) and make youth feel disconnected, they create an atmosphere where these same youth are likely to engage in behaviors such as underage drinking.

This theme was further evident in the most common answer given by participants regarding who or what influenced them to start drinking alcohol. The largest contingent of youth indicated that it was not another individual or some other influence, but rather it was simply their choice to drink. Under this category, the qualitative data suggested that young people view underage drinking as a normal/routine part of growing up and experimenting and searching for “freedom” and “excitement.” According to the co-researchers, the creation and enforcement of rules/restrictions result in youth wanting to rebel. Alcohol becomes a tool used by youth to seek freedom or to rebel from the established rules. Gender was revealed to be a major issue related to this finding. Girls continually expressed the fact that they are routinely denied the “freedom” to engage socially with others and that the heightened restrictions that are placed on them only encourage them to rebel.

“Peers and parties” was another prominent theme revealed in the qualitative and quantitative data regarding factors that contribute to underage drinking. Again, this finding is consistent with the data presented earlier that highlights the fact that underage drinking is a social phenomenon. In the qualitative data, participants consistently expressed the fact that drinking is an expected part of the “social” life of young people, and it occurs at a variety of “special” events. The quantitative data revealed that “special” events encompass a host of activities including Friday night celebrations, parties following a stressful week, dances (prom), sporting events, and cultural celebration (such as weddings and quinceañeras). Additionally, among this sample of youth, 70% reported that their “friends” drink alcohol. Of those youth who reported drinking alcohol, 78% indicated that their friends look after them when they drink. Further highlighting the social aspect of underage drinking, 37% of youth in the sample indicated that when students bring alcohol to school, they share it with others.

A final factor that appears to be connected to underage drinking in Riverbank has to do with the community profile. According to the participants in this study, the “**small community**” atmosphere contributes to underage drinking in Riverbank. Youth perceive that there is little to do in Riverbank. In their attempts to create “social activities,” alcohol becomes a central theme to “having a good time.” Given the small community (where everyone knows everyone), it is easy for youth to get access to alcohol.

There were two interestingly findings connected to the “small community atmosphere” and factors connected to underage drinking. In the sample, 55% of the youth indicated that if they wanted help with a possible drinking problem, they would not know where to go. Additionally, 40% of the youth indicated that if confidential services were available in Riverbank for underage drinking, they would not use them.

Research Question #3

3) What strategies can be employed to address the issues surrounding underage drinking in Riverbank?

The answer to the final research question emerged as a result of both the specific data generated from the research study AND the co-researchers’ interpretation of the data. According to the co-researchers, given the fact that underage drinking is a complex problem, the solutions must also be complex. Solutions/strategies must address the multiple factors that contribute to underage drinking: a) mixed messages received by youth, b) the devaluing of youth, and c) the social nature of underage drinking.

It is important to note that prominently embedded in the survey data was the youths’ expressed opinion that “nothing can be done” to address the problem of underage drinking. That is, the youth in the sample resoundingly expressed the opinion that in the current “cultural” climate, underage drinking is a natural part of growing up. This is not an issue that is specific to Riverbank, but rather is a nationwide phenomenon. Given this view of reality, the youth co-researchers in this study began constructing strategies for addressing the “problem” of underage drinking from the vantage point that underage drinking is not a youth problem but rather an adult problem.

The primary strategy for addressing underage drinking in Riverbank focuses squarely on the issue of mixed messages and the engagement of youth and adults in authentic dialogue and action. The co-researchers from this study believe that to begin addressing the problem of underage drinking, adults must be engaged in an educational process that involves various components: 1) Adults must learn how to talk to youth about complex issues such as underage drinking. The co-researchers believe that parents/guardians/adults need to be “trained” to engage in conversations with youth. It is the co-researchers’ belief that, at present, adults are not prepared or equipped with the skills necessary to engage youth in meaningful conversations. 2) Adults must learn how to listen. The co-researchers believe that adults possess a level of arrogance that they have all the answers. It is the opinion of the co-researchers that adults believe they have the answers because of their age/experience. As a result, adults fail to listen to the experiences of youth, and in the process they fail to connect with young people. 3) Adults must be trained regarding strategies for allowing youth to have freedom that allows young people to make responsible choices/decisions. The co-researchers firmly believe that parents/adults/guardians create rules/restrictions that they believe will deter youth from participating in harmful activities but that ultimately contribute to rebellion and harmful behaviors. 4) Adults must be educated about actions that lead to youth being devalued and the ultimate consequences of the devaluing of youth. The co-researchers believe that adults engage in both overt and covert actions/behaviors that leave significant numbers of youth disconnected from them. The youth co-researchers are of the opinion that when young people are disconnected from adults, there is little incentive for youth to act responsibly.

These observations offer a starting point for creating actions that begin to address the complex problems surrounding underage drinking. To this end, the co-researchers in this study are recommending the construction of a series of “workshops” or “trainings” that would be designed to engage adults in an educational process that addresses the core components delineated above. It is important to note that the co-researchers from this study do not have a clearly articulated “curriculum” for the training. Rather, it is the co-researchers’ vision that the creation of the content of the workshop would involve a partnership between youth and adults.

This recommendation, centered on the engagement of adults in an educational process to promote authentic dialogue between adults and youth, is directly in line with the data generated from the 678 youth in this study. When asked what would keep them from drinking, the number one factor expressed by the youth was “family.” This suggests that youth are looking to their family members, first and foremost, regarding the messages they receive about drinking. It is the belief of the co-researchers that when adults have a clear sense of themselves and are better equipped to engage youth in difficult conversations, youth will come away from these encounters with messages that allow them to make healthier, more informed decisions surrounding issues such as underage drinking.

Youth in this sample also indicated that “playing sports” (64.6%) and “being involved in activities” keep them from drinking. These findings suggest that youth want to be connected and want to be engaged, and, when they are, they are less likely to engage in activities such as underage drinking. Again, this finding is embedded in the recommendation for the engagement of adults in an educational process that emphasizes how to value and connect with young people.

CONCLUSIONS

There is a serious/significant problem regarding underage drinking in Riverbank. The particular concern is with the early age of onset (average age 13.6 years). The fact that underage drinking appears to be a “social phenomenon” (a way to connect with/engage with others) is of concern. Most youth in the sample tend to drink on “special occasions.” The concern is that there is a wide range of activities that constitute “special occasions.” Alcohol appears to be an important component of “celebrations” for young people in Riverbank.

At the same time, there was general surprise that the problem of underage drinking is not “more” significant. Students in Riverbank tend to engage in underage drinking at a comparable level to youth across the nation—no more, no less.

The factors connected to underage drinking are complex. A host of variables appear to produce an atmosphere where underage drinking is supported. Mixed messages from adults appear to be a major contributor to drinking. While youth are told about the negative consequences of drinking, they witness behaviors that suggest that drinking is not a problem.

In addition to mixed messages, another prominent factor connected to underage drinking involves the merger of growing up and the creation and enforcement of rules/restrictions that result in youth wanting to “experiment” and wanting to “rebel.” Alcohol becomes a tool used by youth to rebel. It is believed that youth who feel connections to adults are less likely to engage in underage drinking because they do not want to “let adults down.” When adults engage in activities that devalue youth and make youth feel disconnected, they create an atmosphere where these same youth are likely to engage in behaviors such as underage drinking.

The “small community” atmosphere of Riverbank also appears to contribute to underage drinking. Youth perceive that there is little to do in Riverbank. In their attempts to create “social activities,” alcohol becomes a central theme to “having a good time.” Given the small community, it is easy for youth to get access to alcohol.

In the current knowledge base on strategies for addressing problems surrounding underage drinking, the overwhelming preponderance of recommendations focus on addressing youth: building their knowledge of the consequences and effects of alcohol consumptions and educating them on alternatives to alcohol. This is also consistent with the messages reported by youth in the study which indicated that the information they receive from their parents focuses on “don’t do it.” Nevertheless, this “alcohol abstinence only” focus appears to be having minimal impact. In this study, the ultimate recommendation is that underage drinking is not a youth problem but rather an adult problem and that the primary focus for addressing the complex issue of underage drinking must be on adults. The youth in this study have proposed engaging adults in an educational process that promotes a deeper understanding of how to engage and listen to young people and that ultimately leads to stronger bonds between adults and young people and the valuing of youth. When such an environment exists, it is believed that issues such as underage drinking will become less significant.

Appendix A: Step by Step Survey on Drinking

Appendix B: Step by Step Survey on Drinking by Gender

Appendix C: Step by Step Survey on Drinking by Grade Level